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ABSTRACT

Although a recent study shows that school children in Denmark are acquiring initial reading proficiencies at a slower pace than in previous years, that there were more very good readers and more very poor readers in 1972-73 than in 1966, that the average reading performance was lower in 1972-73 than in 1966, and that children in 1972-73 read more slowly than those in 1966, neither Danish parents nor educators have voiced much concern about it. They point out as reasons for poorer test scores that a greater variety of approaches in the teaching of reading are being used, that less time is spent on the traditional "spelling out" instructional approach, that the number of instructional hours allocated to reading has been reduced, and that the increase in working mothers means children get less help with their homework. The public attitude is one of, "the start is slow, but they will catch up." Americans could learn from the Danish experience and reaction that it might be wise to delay formal reading instruction to age seven and not to be tyrannized by reading scores. (TJ)

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THE SOFT START OF THE DANISH SCHOOLS:

LEARNING TO READ--SLOWLY

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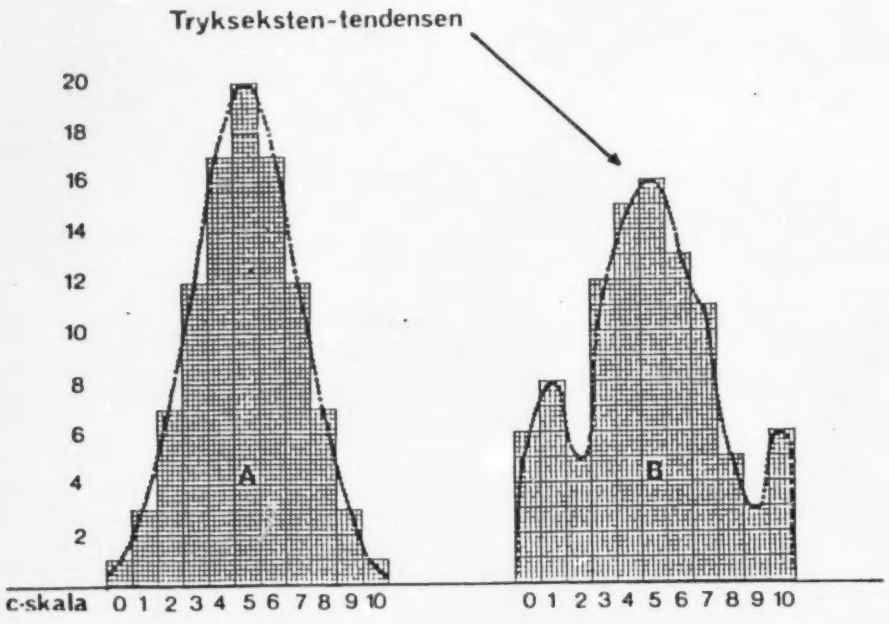
Throughout the 1960s there had been a growing feeling among Danish teachers that children were learning to read initially at a slower pace than was the case of even five or six years before. Standardized reading tests conducted in 1966 and again in 1972-1973 with children in the second through fifth grades in the Lyngby-Taarbaek area north of Copenhagen supported those general beliefs. The major findings of the Lyngby-Taarbaek investigation were twofold:

1. Children were acquiring initial reading proficiencies at a slower pace than in previous years.
2. In 1972-1973 there were more very good readers than in 1965. There were also more really poor readers. Tne average reading performance in 1972-1973 was lower than in 1966. This trend was labeled the "Tryksekste neffekt," or the squash-down effect.

The figures on the following page illustrate this concept.



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Den gule serie. Paedagogiske forskningsrapporter 5.Eds. Søgaard, Arne, Børge Jensen and Mogens Hansen. Copenhagen, 1975.

Figure A demonstrates the distribution of reading proficiencies of 1966 third grades. As the picture indicates, there is an equal number of very good and very poor readers. Figure B depicts the distribution of reading proficiencies in 1972-73 third grades. As the curve indicates, the number of poor readers had increased greatly. The number of very good readers had increased considerably. And the average reading performance had been reduced.

Three additional minor findings of the Lyngby-Taarbaek investigation were:

1. Children of 1972-1973 read at a slower pace than was the case in 1966.
2. Children of 1972-1973 make more errors than was the case in 1966.
3. Children of 1972-1973 are more proficient in reading whole sentences than in reading single, isolated words.

The Danish school people are unable to explain the reasons for the slow reading start and the increasing spread in competencies with any degree of certainty. Some of the following causation factors have been suggested:

1. There is today a much greater availability of varied reading material than was the case ten to fifteen years ago.
2. Teachers of today tend to use a greater variety of approaches in the teaching of reading.

3. Less time is now spent on the traditional "spelling out" approach, a quasi-phonetic teaching method.
4. The actual number of hours of instructional time allotted to reading has been reduced because of a push for integrated subject matter and the abolishment of Saturday school attendance.
5. Though Danish school people feel that all members of society have become more knowledgeable about how to obtain effective home-school relationships, the belief is that parents of today spend less time helping their children with homework. The ever increasing number of working mothers is seen as the obvious reason for that trend.

Although Danish people have a long tradition of being a "reading public," respectful of academic accomplishments, neither teachers, administrators, nor parents voice any concerns about permanent reading failure because of the Lyngby-Taarbaek findings. The reason for this calmness of attitude can perhaps be attributed partly to the basic Danish tendency never to become alarmed about anything before all the facts are known. The lack of despair about reading scores may also be explained by the fact that the Lyngby-Taarbaek study further indicated that though children of 1972-1973 learned to read initially at a slower pace, by the fifth grade students were reading as well as was the case in 1966. The level of total reading

performance became adjusted by the fifth grade. However, the distribution of good and poor readers did not change as the students grew older.

The professional literature discusses all this in a dispassionate manner. There are varied opinions and much interest but no sense of panic. Writers speculate whether the recent Danish school reforms have been too demanding and confusing for teachers to implement. Also, implied in the literature, is the assumption that newer teaching methods are removed from the parents' own school experiences, producing an undercurrent of resentment in the homes regarding "new-fangled" procedures.

But most frequently encountered, and most typically Danish, is the question of whether it is wise and desirable for the school, through varied materials and expanded methods, to increase the performance spread among students. In other words, "Do the schools have a moral right to add to the polarization among social groups, or should public education serve as an equalizer?" That is the question which appears to trouble, most seriously, the Danish educator. Thoughtful and tentative in manner, the Danish school people approach the puzzle of the slow reading start with a sense of deferred judgment.

The present writer had an opportunity to observe the reading programs of several Danish second grades in August of 1976 and again in August, 1978. The most noticeable fact drawn from these observations was the

extremely immature level of the reading material utilized. Though these youngsters were starting their second year of formal reading instruction, the reading books were of a type we would classify as pre-primer level. To illustrate:

Bo may have an ice cream.
Jan may have an ice cream.
Bo and Jan may have two ice creams.

Here is a red ice cream.
Here is Bo with a red ice cream.
Here is Jan with a red ice cream.

See the red ice cream.
You may color the ice cream.
You may color the ice cream red.

Or:

Mother has flour and eggs in her bag.
Ulla has eels and sausages in her bag.

The kitty does not have flour nor eggs.
The kitty does not have eels nor sausages.
The kitty does not have a bag.

Plainly, this level of reading performance in an American second grade would be thought of as remedial in quality. It would certainly cause concerns about future reading failure. Unless an American second grade child advanced very rapidly and smoothly to a higher level,

referrals to a reading specialist and possible testing for learning disabilities would very likely result.

The immaturity of the Danish second grade reader becomes all the more conclusive when one realizes that these children were one year older than American second graders. Danish children start the first grade at age seven, not six as is the case in the United States. Therefore, the pre-primer reading performance of the Danish second grade child should be placed alongside the realization that these youngsters were eight or nearly eight years old.

Nevertheless, no one in Denmark appeared the least bit worried. In fact, teachers, principals and parents interviewed seemed quite pleased with the children's performances. "Yes," they seemed to say. "The start is slow, but they will catch up." Most of the school people were keenly aware of the Lyngby-Taarbaek findings since the tests had been conducted in the same community. Secure in the knowledge that the children would eventually master the reading process, a very relaxed, though serious-minded attitude prevailed within the primary classrooms.

One, possibly two lessons could be learned from the Danish experience. Firstly, it might be wise to delay formal reading instruction to approximately age seven instead of forcing reading lessons and phonics drill upon younger and younger children, as is now the case in the United States. All three Scandinavian nations start

first grade at age seven. And Scandinavians, in the long run, experience negligible reading failure.

Piaget places the age of conservation, the capacity for abstract thinking, at around age seven. The combination of the Scandinavian long-term success in reading instruction and the phenomenon of the seven year old first grade child may not be a mere coincidence. It is entirely possible that the age of seven is simply the most natural age for most children to receive their first formal reading lessons.

Secondly, we, the American school people, might profitably follow the Danish example of not allowing ourselves to become tyrannized by reading scores. Reading scores do not necessarily represent reality. They provide only limited and questionable information about the total reading performance of a person. Reading scores are subject to numerous interpretations and flaws. Cultural, geographical and linguistic biases are just a few of these.

The American obsession with reading scores does, however, create a new reality. That is the reality of failure. The anticipation of failure lurks within the minds of children, teachers and parents. The anxiety about failure casts a suffocating cloud of uneasiness over our reading programs. In a never-ending push to improve reading scores, we intensify our instructional efforts, forcing increased amounts of drill upon American youngsters. Boredom, despair, and diminishing returns are all too

frequently our only rewards. Teachers and parents would do well to rebel against the oppressive quality of the American reading scores, the incessant comparisons of performances, and assert the rights of children to learn in a relaxed, humane environment. If we did not try so desperately hard, we might experience more permanent success. The Danes seem to.

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